

The B-List: 5/13

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}
Tuesday, May 13 2008 7:00 PM -

How about this starting pitching? Hands down, it has been nothing short of amazing thus far in 2008, and the fact that this team is just 20-19 speaks to how inconsistent (incompetent?) the bats have been through the quarter pole of the season. Last night, Paul Byrd got a myriad of spectacular plays from the defense en route to 7 1/3 shutout innings and a 4-0 Tribe win over the A's. Buff hits on all of this in today's B-List, and also offers up installments of "Gark Smash!", "Squander Ball", and "Managerial Head Scratchers".



FINAL SCORE				
Athletics (23-17)	0	0	0	0
Indians (20-19)	(2	nd	0.5 GB MIN)	1

W: Byrd (2-3) L: Dushscherer (3-2) S: Kobayashi (1)

Did we shift back to the 1968 mound and no one told me?

1) Dee-fense!

"My box score is going to look great in the paper, but it's because of those guys ... If they don't make those plays, who knows how many

runs I give up?"
-- P. Byrd

One of the things that has always charmed me about Paul Byrd is his willingness to bend over backwards to credit everyone else and absorb as much blame as possible. I'm not sure how to explain it, because I'm not totally consistent with my feelings on the subject. I mean, when LeBron James credits his teammates, I appreciate the effort he's making, but ... I've seen your teammates, Mr. James. It feels artificial because ... well, have I mentioned that I've seen your teammates? Yet Byrd can do it and the facts support the same level of artifice and I still find it charming. Maybe it's because Byrd is old and preposterous and clearly not the best player on his team, or his pitching staff, or even on the pitching staff of his team whose last name starts with "B."

Anyway, I usually start with the starting pitcher for the simple reason that he normally provides the most material. He also normally has the most direct control over the result of the game. Last night, however, it really does make sense to start with a feature that usually gets glossed over, the team defense.

Now, this has not been a very good defensive team in recent years. Victor Martinez has improved (his 2007 numbers were excellent), but Garko is still learning his position, Blake is average and prone to error streaks, Jhonny Peralta has stretches of adequacy, and our corner outfielders often have bouts of indecision, poor range, and throws that come from the realm of hyperbolic geometry. But the defense has really picked up over the wonderful pitching streak, and just last night:

- *) Grady Sizemore threw a strike to Martinez, then Martinez did a good job of tagging out a lumbering Frank Thomas at the plate to end the second
- *) David Dellucci made a leaping catch at the wall in the third to prevent an extra-base hit
- *) Martinez gunned down Donnie Murphy trying to steal third for a strike-em-out-throw-em-out double play to end the fifth
- *) Sizemore made an athletic diving catch of a short fly in the sixth
- *) Asdrubal Cabrera made a spectacular diving catch in short center on a looping line drive

Of these plays, only the throw to the plate DIRECTLY saved a run, but in a game that was 1-0 for a very long time, supported by an offense that has been pretty putrid, those plays add up pretty fast. (After all, we lost a game on the "Murphy steal play" when Blake simply dropped the ball.)

Here is where I would make some pithy comment about the guys not taking their offensive struggles out in the field with them if I'd thought of something pithy to say. But that was really good (and important) defense last night.

2) Streaking

No, not in the '70s sense, but rather in the "once through the rotation" sense. Consider that when C.C. Sabathia gave up a run in his last appearance, it would be the worst start by a Cleveland starter through the entire trip through the five active starters.

Paul Byrd extended the Indians' streak of scoreless innings thrown by starting pitchers to 34 $\frac{1}{3}$ with 7 $\frac{1}{3}$ 5-hit innings: although some of the balls described above could be considered struck well enough to be "hit-like," the fact is, Byrd threw 7+ scoreless innings because ... well, because he pitched pretty darned well.

Byrd augmented his 5-hit night with 7 strikeouts, including Frank Thomas and Emil Brown twice each. Oddly enough, two of the five hits were to right-handed hitters, ruining my "Paul Byrd Only Gives Up Hits To Lefties" theory, but this is par for my personal course of Bad Theory Generation. However, all five hits were singles, and Byrd actually sported a "positive" 7:6 GO:FO ratio.

We talked a little bit last time about how to recognize which Paul Byrd one is getting on any particular night, and I haven't come up with anything that compelling yet, but it bears mentioning that Byrd was locating pretty well right off the bat: each of the first three hitters in the 1-2-3 first inning started 0-2, and Byrd threw 2 balls in 13 pitches overall. The A's only swung and missed at one of them (when Jack Cust was Custed swinging to end the inning), but hey. In the second, although he gave up three singles (the third of which led to Thomas being thrown out at home), he had the same fine 10:2 strike-to-ball ratio and started each hitter off with a strike.

Byrd ended up retiring the side in order in five of the seven full innings he faced: he gave up all his hits in the second (ending on the Thomas play) and 5th (ending on the Murphy play). I'm not ready to claim that Byrd has turned any sort of proverbial corner, but I'll say this: when Paul Byrd has good command, he is a valuable pitcher.

3) Gark Smash!

Ryan Garko hammered a pitch from ex-Tribe farmhand Andrew Brown over the center field wall with two runners on base to put the game out of reach. Brown has actually gotten off to a fine start this season (2.45 ERA), but the pitcher is almost immaterial: Garko has been so lame, so crummy, so ta-ra-ra-goon-de-ay that him hammering anything over anything else is pretty newsworthy.

How surprising was it on a team level that Ryan Garko was the one to come through with the big hit? Consider this: Garko's blast came at the end of a streak of 42 at-bats by right-handed Indians hitters in which they collected a grand total of ONE HIT. **One for forty-two.** That's really, really excrement. I wondered about whether we had enough left-handed bats on the team, especially for pinch-hitting purposes, but leaving aside switch-hitters Cabrera and Martinez (because they did not bat right-handed during the string), right-handers Garko, Peralta, Jamey Carroll, Casey Blake, Franklin Gutierrez, Ben Francisco, and Kelly Shoppach combined to be next to completely worthless for the equivalent of a game and a half. (Gutierrez got the hit. Huzzah.)

The team is hitting .237/.315/.359 against right-handed pitching this season. Of course, they're hitting .237/.330/.351 against

left-handed pitching. I am not sure whether to invent a new word to describe this or simply plagiarize "craptacular."

(Thanks to FOX radio's Andrew Siciliano for the pointer.)

Look, this started as a celebration of Garko's hit, which was huge, so let's end there as well. Garko has had a hit in six of his nine games in May, so ... maybe ... well, anything you got, Ryan, I'm nodding vigorously. Nice hit!

4) Squander Ball in Theory and Practice

On one hand, I give you the 6th and 7th innings: in the 6th, after a leadoff single, Jhonny Peralta Custed looking and David Dellucci advanced him to scoring position with a groundout. Starter Justin Duchscherer then intentionally walked Victor Martinez, because a single would have scored a run, and this is Martinez' skill set. An out would end the inning, and this is Travis Hafner's skill set. Thus the inning ended with no runs when Hafner grounded out to first.

In the 7th, Asdrubal Cabrera singled and advanced to second when Casey Blake was hit by a pitch with two outs. Lefty ex-Tribesman Alan Embree was summoned to face Grady Sizemore and struck him out swinging at 3-1 and 3-2 pitches. Sizemore is having a pretty good season, but still has trouble with lefties, hitting a meager .179 off them.

On the other hand, the Indians' run in the first was driven in on a Travis Hafner single with two outs, and Garko's blast was also a two-out shot, meaning that the Indians scored all four of their runs with two outs. Apparently Squandering is in the eye of the beholder.

5) Managerial Head-Scratchers

Of all the skills a #2 hitter should have, Jhonny Peralta exhibits approximately none. Peralta is now hitting .202 on the season and whiffed twice while

going 0-for-4. This surprised a guy in Lima, although admittedly, he just came out of his coma over the weekend.

6) Bullpen update

Raffy Perez was called to face left-handed Not Mike Sweeney, since he had been 2-for-2 against Byrd to that point. Oakland manager Bob Geren countered by bringing in right-handed Was Mike Sweeney, who promptly grounded out.

Masa Kobayashi then earned his first save of the season by retiring four of the next five hitters, including a swinging Cust of Daric Barton to start the ninth.

With this starting staff, it was certainly dumb to have

carried 12 pitchers for so long. Actually, with THIS starting staff, an EIGHTH pitcher seems luxurious. I don't know if we can find three more right-handed hitters who can't hit in the system, though. It seems like we'd get one who could by accident. It's hard to sustain that kind of consistency.

7) Around the Division

Shortstop Edgar Renteria smoothly flipped his backhand toss to No Actual Tiger to turn Mark Teahen's potential inning-ending grounder into the winning run as the Royals edged ahead of the Tigers in the game and in the standings. Joakim Soria is evil.

The Blue Jays scored 5 runs in beating the Twins, or more runs than they scored in the entire four-game series against the Indians.

The White Sox squandered an excellent performance by John Danks to lose 2-0 to the Angels. "Neener," said Cleveland fans with appropriate sympathy. "Also, neener."

8) Completely False Statement for the Google Search Engine

Mark Shapiro is lamenting his signing of Jhonny Peralta, in that he meant to sign a young Dominican player named "Johnny Peralta" and thought it was just a typo. This false statement lacks accuracy. Fire Derek Shelton.